

ENJOY YOUR MUSEUM

III:

**Pottery and
Porcelain**

By

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I POTTERY AND PORCELAIN AS AN ART

To the lover of beautiful things, especially of beauty for its own sake apart from anything it may represent, there is no more interesting art than that of the potter; no art that can more strongly appeal to the aesthetic sense; no art whose humble followers are greater enthusiasts.

Nowhere else except in sculpture can such grace of line and form be found; and even painting lags behind it in richness and splendor of color. Then there are the added charms of dainty material, lovely texture, and decoration of endless variety. Indeed, the pottery enthusiast will often contend that a fine vase or jar holds a distinct advantage over a fine painting or sculpture in that it may be enjoyed aesthetically, like a sunset, without any disturbing emotions as to what it may or may not signify.

Another charm to be looked for in this art is the individual touch of the potter, the charm of personality—a charm that a machine-made article can never impart. Few realize that the potter's art, though the oldest in the world, remains today over ninety per cent pure handcraft, and this in spite of modern inventions and machinery. Compare it, for instance, with the textile art which is over ninety per cent machine work. The simple process of shaping a pot by human hands as it turns on a wheel remains exactly the same as it was in prehistoric time. Even in shapes that cannot be fashioned on a wheel but are pressed or cast in a mould—such as a squarish pot—their finishing, glazing and decorating are almost entirely handwork.

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One of the disadvantages of manufacturing any object on a large scale and by machinery is that so many articles are produced which are absolute repetitions. Pottery shaped on a wheel, however, bears to such objects the relationship which a painting bears to a print, which may be a good impression but is only one of hundreds, all very much alike. On a wheel it is more difficult to make two pieces of pottery exactly alike than to make them different, hence the owner of such a piece may rest assured that his possession is unique.

Few realize, too, what a large and important part pottery plays in our daily life. It is used by practically everyone and is found in every home in one form or another. It is an art therefore in which we should all become interested, whether studying a few choice examples at home, or the many examples to be found in a museum. Yet how few are able to appreciate the row upon row of beautiful pottery so often seen in our museums. Of one thing we may be sure, that no matter how often we view them, they will be to all of us a "valley of dry bones" unless we bring to them a seeing eye and an understanding heart.

II DIFFERENT KINDS OF POTTERY

The word pottery in its broadest sense includes everything made of clay, everything from a common brick (even sun-dried) to the finest of Oriental porcelain. The term Ceramic Art is also employed in the same broad sense. The word pottery is also used in a nar-

rower sense as referring to ware of the coarser kind and excluding porcelain, stoneware, faience and other fine varieties. Such double usage is of course very confusing. Especially is porcelain regarded by many people as something entirely different from pottery. Both have therefore been included in our title here, but in the discussion of our subject we shall use the word pottery in its broadest sense.

Let us note briefly some of the better known kinds of pottery. First in interest stand the porcelains—"the aristocrats of the art." They are distinctly different from other kinds of pottery, with the single exception of stoneware. Porcelain is generally distinguished by the fineness and whiteness of its body—sometimes resembling the finest of statuary marble; also by the translucence of its body where fairly thin, or as seen on sharp edges when held against the light; also by its hardness, although this varies considerably according to the "paste" (the clayey mixture) of which it is composed.

There are three kinds of porcelain of which we should have some knowledge. First, Hard Paste Porcelain, called also True, or Natural, Porcelain because composed chiefly of China Clay (kaolin clay) and China Stone (mostly feldspar), both found in nature. It is so hard that it resists a knife or file and gives a metallic ring when struck; and so vitreous throughout—so non-porous—that a drop of ink may be removed from a broken surface as readily as from a glazed surface. As a rule it is beautifully white—sometimes so white as to be cold and harsh. Most of the Chinese porcelain is "true" porcelain.

The second kind is Soft Paste Porcelain—called also

Artificial, or Glassy, Porcelain because a glass-forming composition is substituted for the China Stone. It is soft enough to yield to a knife or file. It is also of a softer whiteness—sometimes approaching a creamy white, and more translucent than true porcelain. The third is Bone Porcelain, made of China Clay, China Stone, and a large admixture of bone-ash. In hardness, whiteness and translucence it holds a middle ground between the other two porcelains.

Nearest to porcelain comes Stoneware; in fact it is frequently classed with porcelain. It may be as hard and occasionally as white, though generally it is gray or a pale yellowish brown. And on a sharp edge it is even translucent in a few cases. It can easily be distinguished from other pottery except porcelain by putting the tongue to a freshly broken surface. The tongue adheres to the pottery because of its porous body, but it will not to stoneware. Parian pottery (widely used in statuettes), Iron-stone China (a trade name), and the famous Wedgwood products, Jasper and Basalt, are all stoneware. So are common stone jugs, ordinary drain pipe, and so on.

All pottery other than porcelain and stoneware is often grouped together as earthenware. It is made from the more common clays and is always porous unless covered by a glaze. The chief difference between it and porcelain is that it is opaque whereas porcelain is translucent. It covers an immense field of clay products, including such well-known wares as faience, majolica, lustre ware, Delft ware, and Rockingham ware.

III POTTERY SHAPES

There is a singular fascination in watching a shapeless lump of clay grow into a thing of beauty under the potter's touch. We observe it gradually changing its form as with his fingers or the palm of his hand he brings it nearer and nearer to the shape he sees with his mind's eye. He stops the wheel a moment and we think that he has finished. But no, he is only criticizing it. It is not yet as he feels it should be. Again the wheel revolves, and again his hand, now ever so gently and tenderly coaxes the clay to give him exactly the form he has in mind.

For to the true potter the shape or form of the pot is his first concern. He knows that color and decoration may enhance its charm if its form be good, but he also knows that without good form he can not have a good pot, no matter how good its color and decoration. On the other hand, a simple porcelain pot, unglazed, uncolored, and unadorned, may be a delight to his eye and to the eye of the connoisseur, if pleasing in contour and well-proportioned in mass. Yes, and a delight to his ear if he can click it and bring out a clear ring.

But the potter has to think not only of form as such, but of serviceable form. The vast majority of the potter's products are intended to serve a utilitarian purpose, and here considerations of use must come before considerations of beauty. For to impair the usefulness of an article merely to please the eye would imply a lack of common sense. On the other hand, to consider its usefulness alone with never a thought of pleas-

ing the eye would imply a lack of aesthetic sense. The potter who is an artist as well as a craftsman is never content with merely satisfying the utilitarian needs of an article made for use, but always finds a way to add the sweetening touch of beauty.

Where the intention is not utilitarian the potter, of course, may do as he pleases. For instance, a vase intended for holding flowers must have a base of such proportions as to keep the whole in balance, even though sprays or branches spread widely at the top. But a vase intended simply as a thing of beauty needs only to be well balanced in itself. Therefore in observing a piece of pottery obviously made for use, study its fitness for the given purpose and realize that if unfit, no amount of pleasing form, color, and decoration can ever redeem it as a work of art.

And we should remember that with form everywhere goes its inseparable companion, line, (or outline or contour) as we call the edges of shapes or forms. And upon the beauty of its lines, or of some of them, will depend the beauty of the form. Indeed, a beautiful form without one or more beautiful lines is unthinkable.

It is often said that a hundred people are interested in beauty of color to one interested in beauty of line. Why not resolve to be that one! There is a vast field of aesthetic enjoyment in the various arts, and in nature too, for the eye trained to appreciate beauty of line. And there is no better way to train it than on the outlines of beautifully shaped pottery—on such lines, for instance, as may be seen in the subtle loveliness of curve which the Chinese potters have translated into visible and tangible shapes.

IV STUDYING LINE AND FORM IN POTTERY

The best way to study the outlines of pleasing shapes is to draw them in the air with your finger or pencil as if tracing them on a glass before you. Close one eye and hold your finger at such a distance from the other eye and at such an angle to the line traced that the point of your finger or pencil appears to cover it. And to get the full value of a curve hold up against it your pencil or the straight edge of a book, for lines, like colors and lights and darks, give their fullest value when contrasted with their opposites.

And as you trace a beautiful line try to *feel* it—feel its flow and rhythm somewhat as you would the flow and rhythm of a beautiful melody. One should learn to feel as well as to see the beautiful in art, otherwise aesthetic appreciation never becomes more than a pale pleasure. And a capacity for feeling may be developed by exercise quite as well as a capacity for seeing.

And what is a beautiful line? Beauty of line is best summed up, like beauty of color and beauty of design, as unity with variety. The straight line is wholly lacking in beauty because it is all unity and no variety. It is the most monotonous of lines. Next comes the arc of the circle as lacking in beauty. Though it has variation, it varies the same throughout its course. It is the most monotonous of curved lines.

A graceful curve has been defined as "one which continually varies without varying too much;" also as "distinguished by moderation as well as by variation, even approaching closely to straightness in some part

of its course." The curve of the oval presents the greatest opportunity for fine relationships in variety of curve subtlety, and appears constantly in pottery and vase forms.

But important to a shape as are pleasing outlines, the mass within them must also appear pleasing. We must feel that the parts which make up the mass of the shape are in orderly relation to each other, making the shape itself appear orderly, and a shape will appear orderly, and possibly beautiful, according to the completeness of these relations in rhythm, sequence, proportion and balance, resulting in a harmony or unity of shape. To appreciate the respective positions of the parts, imagine horizontal and vertical lines passing through the most noticeable points of the shape. These lines and their points of intersection once established will give the eye exact landmarks from which to make definite observations.

In viewing pottery we should also have the feeling of *volume*. Volume is to pottery what space is to architecture. A good pot should look hollow, just as a good house should look habitable. Volume is revealed either by concavity, as in a bowl, or by a convexity which asserts the space within; or again, by the transition from concave to convex. The control of volume, the refinement of it for the total effect, is one of the first principles of good pottery.

There is also the factor of thickness or thinness of walls. This may be directly apparent, as from the upper view of a bowl, or it may be implied. The suggestion of thickness is rendered with great skill by the Chinese potter, who generally works on a sliding scale of inter-relationship between thickness and volume.

STUDYING COLOR

But it is not by line and form alone that pottery makes its aesthetic appeal. The sense of color finds in it satisfaction for all its needs. No other art can offer such splendor of hue, nor color harmonies so rich and so lasting—in fact so everlasting.

But handling color in pottery-making is not the simple thing that it is in painting. The painter mixes his colors on his palette and knows exactly the result before he touches his brush to the canvas. But after the potter has mixed and applied his colors with the greatest care he is still at the mercy of the fire in his kiln. His colors are all mineral colors and changeable under the influence of heat. Even a slight change of draft may upset all his calculations. He is never quite sure of the result until his work is taken from the kiln.

The general color effect of a piece of pottery may be due to its body, to the glaze that covers its body, to the decoration under or over the glaze, or to any two or three of these factors. If without a glaze or decoration its coloring would depend upon the mineral composition of its body, or "paste"—like an ordinary flower pot. Many different color effects are possible here. The many colors seen in modern unglazed bricks illustrate what a great variety of colors may be had by simply baking different kinds of clay.

Although the most important use of glazes in pottery is to make the body impervious to water, it is also a very important factor in the coloring of pottery. In many of the finest and most highly prized Chinese porcelains the glaze is responsible for the entire color

effect. It may be either applied to the whole piece in one coating, or several different glazes applied to it at different places in order to produce varied pattern and color effects. Sometimes remarkable effects are produced by superimposing glazes of different colors over one another.

The glaze also serves an important use in making pottery surfaces pleasing to the touch. Some glazes not only look soft, mellow, waxy, or satin-like, but actually feel so. Indeed, in any consideration of the merits of pottery and porcelain the texture of the surface is conceded a high place.

The glaze used in pottery (except Greek pottery) has much the same composition as common glass. It is applied to the body by spraying, dipping, pouring or with a brush. The coloring agents are various metallic oxides, principally oxides of cobalt, copper, iron and manganese used singly or in combination. Adding tin oxide makes a glaze opaque, having an effect upon it similar to that of Chinese white on water colors.

Most glazes are transparent or translucent, with or without color. A transparent glaze may be used to show the fine quality of a porcelain body, or to serve as a glass which reveals and protects the decoration on the body under it; this is called underglaze decoration. An opaque glaze may be used to hide the poor quality or color of a body or to supply a suitable background for its decoration; this is called an overglaze decoration. Decorations may also be painted over transparent and translucent glazes and sometimes under as well as over them, the result showing perhaps different colors under the glaze, in the glaze, and on the glaze.

Study especially the glazes of Chinese porcelains.

For in the development of colored glazes the Chinese have left all the other potters of the world far behind. Some of their colors are to be found nowhere else and still defy imitation after many centuries.

VI

STUDYING DECORATION

The idea that artistic qualities are exhibited in pottery only when it is decorated in some way—by painting, modeling, or some other kind of ornament—is still firmly impressed on the minds of many people. But to the true potter and to the connoisseur decoration holds a subordinate place in this art.

The special beauty of pottery lies in beauty of line and form made possible by the manipulation of the clay, and beauty of colored glazes fused in the kiln, and beauty of texture under the play of light and the touch of the hand. When all of such beauty has been realized in a piece, to add decoration to it would be an impertinence, like painting the lily. We should view it as we would a beautiful jewel—a beautiful shape, beautifully colored. Ornamentation of any kind would detract from rather than enhance its inherent charm. But, as already noted, in an article made for use, beauty of form is often impossible; and one of the first functions of ornament in this art is to compensate, correct, or qualify the ungainliness of form dictated by necessity.

One should become familiar with the different kinds of decoration in pottery, as a knowledge of them will add greatly to one's enjoyment of decorated ware. From the zigzag borders and patterns in simple lines

scratched or pressed into the clay by the primitive potter there has developed a considerable variety of decorations, such as incised, sgraffito, slip, modeled or relief, painting under or over the glaze, transfer-printing, gilding, and so on. These and other methods should be looked up in books on pottery.

Notice that several kinds of decoration may appear on the same piece of pottery. Notice also that some pieces seem overloaded with decoration; that they impress us like an overdressed person. It is never the quantity of decoration that tells but the right kind in the right place. Any decoration obviously overdone or out of keeping with the use or purpose of the thing decorated, or out of harmony with its lines, form, or color, no matter how good in itself, is bad decoration. For decoration does not exist for itself but for the thing decorated, and therefore should be in perfect accord with it.

There is another principle involved here. The pottery decorator should show an awareness of volume and recognize that the surface he decorates is convex and not flat. We frequently see on European vases an elaborate landscape painted with figures in the foreground which appear distorted from whatever angle we view them. But you will rarely see distortions on Chinese vases for their decorators select designs suited to a convex surface. And note how often they seem to bend with the surface and hearken after it as if trying to escape around the corner. Which not only shows us there is a corner but excites our interest for what will happen beyond it, thus inviting us to turn the vase and enjoy all sides of it. Such decorations show a proper respect for the form decorated.

VII POTTERY—EAST AND WEST

The pottery of the Chinese marks the crowning point of the potter's achievements in line, form, color and decoration. Particular attention therefore should be given to the Chinese exhibits in the museum, especially the porcelains of the Ming period (1368—1643). Although the Chinese frequently overloaded their decoration, they easily surpassed the European potters in the relation and subordination of it to the piece decorated. In Europe the vase or jar was too often thought of simply as an admirable thing on which to paint miniature landscapes, groups of figures, or bunches of realistic flowers—a mistake from which Western taste has not yet fully recovered.

Although the Japanese lagged far behind the Chinese in porcelain-making, they excelled in earthenware. They, too, had an unerring sense of the relation of decoration to the thing decorated. But in much of their ware they were more concerned about texture than about decoration, especially in that designed for their tea ceremony. This ware is soft and porous and covered with a thick soft glaze as pleasant to the lips as to the touch of the hand. Though its shapes are simple and unassuming, even crude at times, this ware is highly prized by the connoisseur.

Persian pottery is extremely interesting. Indeed, some of it is truly glorious. Their shapes are true potter's shapes, a delight to the eye; their lustres are rarely equalled; and their decorations are usually as simple as they are appropriate.

Examples of Egyptian pottery are to be found in

most museums. Some of it even resembles porcelain, though not so translucent nor so compact. Their colors, green, red, yellow and violet are all good, but their best was a fine celestial blue which has been scarcely rivaled after 3000 years. And everywhere in the ruins of Assyria and Babylonia fragments of variously colored glazed ware have been found, some of it a beautiful blue.

Passing on to the continent of Europe one should note the general excellence of the ware of the ancient Greeks. The beauty and simplicity of the forms of their vases have caused them to be regarded as models. Their decorations, illustrating the mythology, history and customs of the people, are generally well related to the forms decorated. And their rich red and black lustres seem still to shine in the same splendor as when turned out of the Grecian workshops more than 2000 years ago.

Passing from ancient Greece to Western Europe we find very few signs of pottery making until the 16th and 17th Centuries, and these inspired mostly by importations of Oriental ware. Since then however, Continental Europe has made great advances in the art, producing such well-known wares as faience, majolica, Delft, Sevres and Dresden.

In England, Bow, Bristol, Derby, Chelsea, Worcester and Wedgwood are some of the famous wares. In spite of many ungraceful shapes, much unrestrained use of color and much over-elaborate decoration, there is usually a certain vigor and refreshing strength about English pottery and porcelain that gains our applause and holds our affection.